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ABSTRACT

In teaching Asian American literature on the college level, the first consideration is to try to choose works that dispel the dominant stereotypes. One of these stereotypes is the "otherness" myth that Asian American culture is very exotic, distant, mysterious, as in "the mysterious and far East." In reality, Asian Americans are here, have been here, and from, say, the perspective of San Francisco, their roots are not so very far to the west across the Pacific. Closely linked to the myth of otherness is the myth of the exotic Asian woman, like Madame Butterfly, who can be loved and left without remorse by the dominant White male. Furthermore, the Asian American culture is huge and varied. To lump together all these cultures into one category is, of course, entirely inappropriate. In fact, there are many definitional issues worthy of investigation. Students need to learn the history of the various cultures, many of which have been in conflict with each other and many of which have been treated badly in the United States. The main reason for teaching Asian American literature at Lesley College is because the instructors value voice and the power of stories to build understanding between people. In the search for authentic voices, Asian American literature is fertile ground. (Lists 24 literature selections and several useful sources.) (TB)

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From Far East to Near West: Teaching Asian American Literature

Presented in panel format at The College English Association Conference, Orlando, 1994 by Bard Rogers Hamlen, Lesley College

First, I want to make it very clear that I am not an expert in Asian American literature. In fact, our presentation is exactly about that: how do those of us who are not experts in this literature and who have been educated, as I certainly was, in a Eurocentric fashion, steeped in the canon, taught almost always exclusively by white men- how do we re-educate ourselves to be able to include other voices in our classrooms? For me in particular, the issue has to do even more with the theories of literary criticism I was taught than the canon voices which I was asked to read. It has taken me quite a while to realize just how culture laden that literary criticism was- taught as I was in the waning days of the New Criticism, challenged to explicate the text without context or biography, encouraged to look for ambiguity, to recognize the "great American themes" of self reliance, independence, guilt, death, and war. I certainly don't remember reading any Asian American writers; in fact I hardly remember reading any women, except for Emily Dickinson, that isolated female allowed into the canon, a few African American "classics", Booker T. Washington, perhaps.

I also remember vividly the first conference on multicultural literature I attended. All these intelligent people were discussing whole bodies of work I had never heard of, titles and authors totally unknown to me. I started jotting down these references, fragments of book titles, names of authors spelled as I heard them, on the fly leaf of the conference folder they had given me. Since I understood so little of what was really going on during that weekend, I just kept writing these references on that flyleaf. By the end of the conference I had filled the entire inside of the conference folder. When I got home, I started researching those fragments and my education began.

Many years later, in the spring of 1993, I had the privilege of attending the MLA conference at Penn State and being in the group led by Amy Ling. What I have been asked to share with you today briefly is what I learned, as a non-expert in Asian American literature, about how to include this literature in the classroom. First

CS 214704

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I would like to explain that I teach adults, sometimes people preparing to be teachers, sometimes young people in their twenties and thirties in our liberal studies bachelor's degree program. We value voice at Lesley College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and we value the power of stories to build understanding both of ourselves and others. So in all of my teaching I am always looking for the authentic voice, for the story which students can discuss, reflect upon, and compare, to some degree with their own. I would like to tell you the characteristics I look for in selecting Asian American voices.

The first consideration is to try to choose works which dispel the dominant stereotypes. I think this is important for every culture, as I understand it, has certain stereotypes that are more firmly held about it, that are more difficult to dispel. We have an obligation as teachers at least not to perpetuate stereotypes. For Asian Americans, as I understand it, one of these stereotypes is the one in the title of my talk- that "otherness" myth that Asian American culture is very exotic, distant, mysterious, as in the mysterious and far East. I'm sure I don't have to explain to you that such a view is Eurocentric- facing East- looking around the Globe to the "Orient". Whereas, the reality is Asian Americans are here, have been here, and from, say, the perspective of San Francisco- their roots are not so very far to the west across the Pacific. I find symbolic the number of stories in which Asian women are portrayed as visiting the Pacific shore to connect with their past lives, wading as did Gus Lee's mother, (*China Boy*) or just looking as does David Wong's character in "Displacement", realizing that the homeland will not come into focus."(*Pangs of Love* p.35)

Closely linked with this myth of distance is the myth of the exotic Asian woman, the Madame Butterfly who can be loved and left without remorse by the dominant, conquering male; the recent success of Miss Saigon as a musical shows us we aren't very far from this myth. As Sau-Ling Wong, points out in a recent article, "Promises, Pitfalls, and The Principles of Text Selection in Curricular Diversification: The Asian American Case", "often under the pretext of cultural sensitivity Asian Americans in life or in art are expected to play the role of exotic no matter how long they and their families have lived in the United States." (113) When we teach Asian American writers, we need to emphasize the contributions of these voices and cultures to the building of the United States society, and the integral part played by Asian Americans in America's history

and contemporary life. Books such as Frank's *Donald Duk*, Kadohota's *The Floating World*, and Minatoya's *Talking To High Monks in the Snow* are examples, in my opinion, of well crafted literary texts which also emphasize the cultural contributions of Asian Americans, in Frank's case in the building of the railroads, in Kadohata's migrant farm labor, and in Minatoya's the middle class professional.

Of course Asian American is a huge field. To lump together all these cultures into one category is, of course, entirely inappropriate. In fact, there are many definitional issues. Are we deciding to define this literature geographically by country of origin? How far "west" are we going? Are we including, for instance, India? If so, should we include Australia? Are the works to be only those set in the United States? Is a novel set in Pakistan but written by an Asian American professor at Yale (*Meatless Days*) to be included? We need to give some thought to these definitional issues when selecting Asian American literature to teach.

Our students need to learn the history of the various cultures, some of which, of course, are or have been in conflict with each other. They need, I think, to learn how the dominant culture in the United States has treated Asian Americans, information about which, usually, their previous schooling has taught them little. So I think the historical and informational value of the text is also important. *Woman Warrior*, for instance, which weaves historical information into the text, or *No No Boy*, which describes the treatment of Japanese Americans during W.W.II are especially wonderful texts for our students. Our students need to be made aware of this history, of the oppressive aspects of our own government's policies. Literature can help expose them to the facts in ways which develop empathetic understanding, I think.

This leads me to my main purpose for teaching Asian American writers. I teach adults, sometimes people preparing to be teachers, sometimes people in their twenties and thirties in our liberal studies bachelor's degree program. We value voice at Lesley, and we value the power of stories to build understanding both of ourselves and others. So in all of my teaching I am always looking for the authentic voice, for the story which students can discuss, reflect upon, and compare, to some degree with their own. The Asian American writers I have read bring strong voices to the classroom, well written and crafted prose, and style which enriches class discussion.

These works also bring stylistic concerns which can lead to useful comparisons with other work. There are also, I think, commonalties across this body of literature which provide for internal comparison. The Asian American themes I find most provocative are themes of duality, always living in two cultures; of interpretation, of having to interpret; and, of course, finding oneself interpreted, sometimes wrongly, by others. There is the theme of finding a way to be heard. There is the theme of reinventing oneself, taking into account one's past and real self. Since reinventing oneself is what we are asking our students to do, this is powerful and helpful literature in the classroom.

The complexity of these themes make for challenges for our students. The themes are often attended by those found in the literature of the oppressed: themes of struggle, survival, humor, community, of resistance rather than conquest, of suffering, of course, but also of endurance and hope. I find these useful and important themes for our students to chew on along with the others found traditionally in American literature: self reliance, independence, ambiguity and guilt.

There is a large and impressive body of work out there. It has been largely invisible. When I went to the Harvard Coop last year to buy Lydia Minatoya's beautiful book, *Talking To High Monks in The Snow,* I was referred to the travel section. That fact is symbolic to me of the need to find, highlight, and teach this body of work. As Amy Ling has said, "It would be ideal if the result of this attention were that everyone would be not only more tolerant of each other's perspectives but actively interested, for only as all diverse peoples that are America find their own voices and sing their individual and communal songs, can we enjoy the full richness and depth in this chorus that is America". "I'm Here" 744)

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